

Literature and Psychology

The News Letter of the Conference on Literature and Psychology of the Modern Language Association

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But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to inquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us--to know
Whence our lives come and where they go.
And many a man in his own breast then delves,
But deep enough, alas! none ever mines.
And we have been on many thousand lines,
And we have shown, on each, spirit and power;
But hardly have we, for one little hour,
Been on our own line, have we been ourselves--
Hardly had skill to utter one of all
The nameless feelings that course through our breast,
And they course on forever unexpressed.
And long we try in vain to speak and act
Our hidden self, and what we say and do
Is eloquent, is well--but 'tis not true!

--Matthew Arnold. The Buried Life

Our apologies to Professor Erwin Steinberg. His authorship of the leading article, FREUDIAN SYMBOLISM AND COMMUNICATION, was acknowledged in the opening paragraphs of the last issue, but the article itself was, through inadvertence, unsigned.

Your Editor's attitude toward his literary mail-bag is somewhat mixed. He is gratified at the steadily growing list of subscribers and members, a little disappointed when the envelopes contain no critical comments or even denunciations. We have grown to be proud of our annual conferences because

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they are truly group discussions with rapid and lively interchange of opinion. Is it possible that our leading articles in each issue are always read and accepted without stimulating any comment, favorable or unfavorable?

A particularly appropriate occasion for comment arises in connection with our Secretary's leading article in the present issue. He has, in fact, permitted us to present it because, as he writes, "I am...anxious to get the reactions of other members of the Conference through [the] News Letter before I button up the whole thing in one of the two chapters on THE SOUND AND THE FURY which I am putting in my little book." Certainly the contention that the characters in Faulkner's novel represented conscious use of the levels of the psyche postulated by Freud was, at least to your Editor, startling.

Another chance remark of your Editor on "the general consensus as to the concept of psycho-literary criticism which our group represents" seems to have raised in the mind of at least one reader a question as to what that "general consensus" is. He writes:

Do you think some statement of our purposes as members of this discussion group would help clarify the reasons for our existence? The News-Letter might be the appropriate vehicle for a brief paragraph or two by as many of our members as possible, describing what he or she expects of the possibilities of marrying the techniques and matter of the two fields, and perhaps pointing out some of the pitfalls.

Well? Will it be possible for the September issue to substitute for a leading article a series of brief notes and comments on any or all of these matters? Your Editor hopefully provides a summer address: Box 33, Neal Shore, Meredith, New Hampshire.

One further matter of interest. We have had so many requests for back numbers, the issues of 1951 and 1952 which are now out of print, that we are considering some form of modified re-issue of these numbers. This will probably be in the form of a mimeographed pamphlet in which the articles and significant comments, as well as the running bibliographies, would be collected, with much of the less important matter omitted. Would many of our present subscribers, other than those who have already indicated their interest, wish to have copies of such a pamphlet? Responses would enable us to estimate the size of the "printing" and the probable cost.

A CONSCIOUS LITERARY USE OF FREUD?

It seems to me extremely likely that William Faulkner, in writing THE SOUND AND THE FURY, which many readers consider his best novel, consciously based several elements of the book on Freudian theory. The novel is made up of three long interior monologues by the brothers Compson, and a final, shorter, concluding section which is not interior monologue. At the time he was writing this novel, Faulkner was much interested in Joyce, and several motifs in the book show some debt to ULYSSES. If it is true that Joyce based part of the organization of ULYSSES on the organization of the human body, this might

indicate one possible source of Faulkner's idea for the pattern which I contend he uses in *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*. Just as Joyce seems to have used the chart of human anatomy, Faulkner seems to have used the chart of human personality as drawn by Freud. In shaping the interior monologue of Benjamin, the idiotic Compson, Faulkner, I believe, drew on Freud's description of the id. In Quentin Compson's interior monologue I believe Faulkner drew on Freud's description of the ego, and in Jason Compson's monologue on the description of the super-ego.

Faulkner was adequately exposed to Freudian theory in New Orleans with the group around Sherwood Anderson and elsewhere, as well as by reading. And the absurd illusion that he is an uneducated, barefoot boy must not blind us to the complicated patterns which he has effectively used in other novels and could be using here. Such a pattern explains much that goes on in the book, and answers some of the questions frequently asked about the novel, such as why he began with the idiot's difficult monologue instead of Jason's easier one.

No fictional characters' experiences and streams of consciousness can seem at all real to readers and at the same time perfectly fit such abstractions as id, ego, or super-ego; but the interior monologues of the Compsons have too much in common with Freud's abstractions for the similarities to be coincidental. Benjamin's monologue and Freud's concept of the id both disregard differences in time; both are outside conventional "law"; both are mercurial, moving swiftly from calm to excitement and back to calm; both are concerned only with self-gratification.

Quentin's monologue, placed second in the book, seems based on the Freudian concept of the ego: Quentin's personality is a field of battle between his love for his sister Caddy and his awareness that this love is taboo. His monologue's alternations between articulate and inarticulate are related to this war. And once Quentin has decided that the war can never be ended except by his self-destruction he abandons all attempts at an armistice.

Jason's section seems clearly based on Freud's formulation of the super-ego: the monologue is carried on nearest the level of speech; Jason is ruthless in his desire to repress pleasure--whether sexual or merely the pleasure the Negroes take in the performances of a tent show; and Jason is frequently said by his mother to be the only one of the brothers who is really close to her, the parent. An illustration of Jason's role as super-ego and Benjamin's as id can be found in an interesting episode in the novel: the idiot escapes from the confining yard fence by way of the gate which Jason has accidentally left open; the idiot seems to be attacking school girls before he is captured and forced back through the gate; his punishment--castration--seems to come out of the psychology textbook.

All three of the interior monologues by the brothers center on their relationships with their sister Caddy. And though there is not space here for any investigation of this, it is possible that Faulkner consciously based Caddy, in the stages of growth of her personality and in her relationships to her brothers, partly on the Freudian concept of the libido. It is interesting in this connection to note that Caddy has no interior monologue in the novel nor could the libido be said to have one in Freudian theory.

The novel flatly states that Mrs. Compson, that unfortunate mother, has "poisoned" her children. Her poison has been a lack of love, which has made

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warped personalities of the Compson children: even Benjamin as the id is "neurotic" if the workings of art permit such loose use of a psychological concept; Quentin is a hopelessly divided and therefore self-destructive ego; Jason as a super-ego overreaches himself in the harshness of his repressive measures; and if it is true that Caddy is in great part based on the libido, her development as charted in the novel is a twisting of the libido's normal development toward full sexuality.

Though there is no space here to present the detailed documentation of the hypothesis stated above, I believe the novel abounds in such documentation. But I should like very much to hear the objections (and statements of support, if any!) which the members of the Conference would be willing to make.

--Carvel Collins
Box 114, Lincoln, Mass.

COMMENT AND CORRESPONDENCE

The Fellowships and Foundations have shown recognition of our specialty, as the following awards indicate:

Dr. Leonard Howard Unger of the University of Minnesota has received a Guggenheim Fellowship for "a study of the possible uses for literary theory of certain of Freud's terms and concepts."

Our member, Professor Joseph Prescott of Wayne University, has been awarded a Ford Fellowship for the academic year 1953-1954, to be devoted to a study of the relationship between psychology and literature, with emphasis on their convergence in the stream-of-consciousness method in modern fiction.

Another recent member, Mr. Simon O. Lesser, wrote on April 19:

Under a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation I am engaged in a study which will be of interest to members of the Conference. What I am attempting to do is develop a naturalistic, not a purely esthetic of response to fiction, an esthetic based on the empirical findings of depth psychology and the social sciences as well as the insights of literary criticism and philosophical esthetics. I'm well aware that this is a brash, not simply a large, undertaking, and I have no illusion that the book on which I am working, which will probably be called The Appeal of Fiction, will fully satisfy anyone. But if it is even moderately successful, it may prove of value to students of fiction and other literary genres and even to students of other arts.

Mr. Abraham H. Steinberg writes, in part, commenting on the general problem raised by Professor Erwin Steinberg's article in the last issue:

We are all acquainted with the kind of study which mechanically translates a literary work into Freudese and leaves us with the despairing feeling that, no matter how

laboriously and intricately it is contrived, the study has reduced a work of art to another example of, let us say, an Oedipus complex. I use "Freudese" because the Freudian vocabulary has achieved widest popularity; it is possible to apply other psychological systems with equal woodenness. No one will argue that such a study is an exercise in literary criticism, but neither is it an exercise in psychology, for what kind of psychology is it that would cut us off from experience and smother our individual judgment?

All that is required of the initiate is the reading of a few books which impart a secret language of magical potency, with which he can grind out studies best described as exercises in word-for-word translation. I suppose the whole process would be speeded up by the publication of a dictionary where the scholar hard pressed for time could rapidly discover that a pond symbolizes the female organ and rhubarb the male, the more rapidly to produce his significant revaluation of Thoreau. Just as the initiate is ready with an interpretation of every crux, so his opponent is convinced that all psychoanalytic studies are so much bunk put out by people who need psychoanalytic study themselves.

A way out of this impasse may be found in the realization that depty psychology provides no more than an approach to a work of art, an aid to understanding, and a basis for a more sensitive critical judgment by the individual.

A question brought up at our initial meeting in New York, whether it is possible to criticize a work psychoanalytically without having been analyzed ourselves, indicates an awareness that we are prone to use psychoanalytic concepts to suit our own other-than-conscious purposes. No single answer can satisfy all aspects of this question, but if we conceive of psychoanalysis as being operative instead of merely linguistic or conceptual, the possibility of communicating the truth of an interpretation is a corollary, regardless of the vocabulary or symbolism of any clique, or of the distortions of an individual within the areas of his own problems. The truth will out, even in psychoanalysis.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (X)

Two dissertations call for special mention. One is quite recent:

Joseph Whitt (Dept. of English, Georgia Institute of Technology) - The Psychological Criticism of Dostoevsky: 1875-1951. A Study of British, American, and Chief European Critics. (Temple University.)

"Deals," writes Dr. Whitt, "with the history and the nature of this body of criticism and its relationship to the development of modern psychology and psychological literary criticism."

The other, which dates from 1942, is a genuinely pioneer work in psycho-literary treatment of Dickens:

Warrington Winters (Dept. of English, Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute) - Unusual Mental Phenomena in the Life and Works of Charles Dickens. (University of Minnesota)

Dr. Winters is also represented in PMLA:

"Dickens and the Psychology of Dreams" - Vol. LXIII, No. 3 (September, 1948), pp. 984-1006

The difficult problem of the use of psycho-dynamics in the teaching of literature, especially on the secondary school level, a technique which has been vividly described as a kind of pedagogical tight-rope walking, has been the subject of two recent articles:

Arthur Wormhoudt - "Ivanhoe and the Teacher" - American Imago, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring, 1953), pp. 39-56.

and also:

Leonard F. Manheim - "Dynamic Bases for the Teaching of Literature" - The English Record (New York State English Council), Vol. III, No. 1 (Fall, 1952), pp. 17-19 and 37; also in The English Quarterly (New York City Association of Teachers of English), Spring, 1952, pp. 17-20.

It is purely to do ourselves honor and not because they are in need of any mention by us that we pay tribute to the two recent works of Dr. Leon Edel:

Willa Cather: A Critical Biography. By E. K. Brown. Completed by Leon Edel. (Knopf)

Henry James: The Untried Years. (Lippincott). The first section of a three-volume study.

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